TIBETAN BLACK THANG-KAS: NEW EVIDENCE ON THE ORIGINS OF A PAINTING TRADITION

Tibetan black paintings (nag-thang) constitute a very specific group in the corpus of Tibetan thang-kas. They are painted using a linear technique on a dark ground, which can be black, blue or brown. The outlines of the figures are drawn in gold, with only occasional touches of other colours for the highlights, generally white and red, to achieve a very dramatic effect. From a technical point of view they are very similar to another group of paintings, the gser-thang, or gold thang-kas, which employ the same linear technique with blue or red on gold ground or gold on red ground. gSer-thangs can represent either wrathful deities or Buddhas, bodhisattvas and peaceful deities, while nag-thangs are used to portray the wrathful protective deities (yi-dam) of the monastery for which they are painted. They are kept and used in the mGon-khang, the chapel for yi-dams in the monastery.¹

The problem that will be addressed in this article concerns the antiquity of the tradition of nag-thang, in the light of the new evidence provided by a previously unpublished painting.

Tucci discusses the two groups of gser-thang and nag-thang among the paintings that he considers difficult to date and to attribute to a specific school of Tibetan Buddhism. Nevertheless, at least for gser-thangs, he thinks that they are rather recent and he declares that he has “never seen any specimen that can be considered earlier than the XVIIIth century”.² Pal, who merges the two groups into one, basically accepts

Tucci’s opinion that none of these thang-kas can be dated earlier than the eighteenth century, even if he proposes a possible dating to the seventeenth century for some of them. He then makes the hypothesis that black thang-kas could have been invented in eastern Tibet, deriving their inspiration from gold and black frontispieces of Chinese sūtras. Stoddard addresses the problem of the origin of the tradition of black thang-kas in the context of her study of the Gold Manuscript of the secret biography of the Fifth Dalai Lama, now in the Guimet Museum in Paris. Observing that the technique used by the painter of the illustrations of this manuscript is basically the same as the linear technique in gold on black ground used in nag-thang, she points out at least two possible early sources for it. The first one are the ninth century banners found in Dunhuang, in which silver pigments are used to delineate the figures on a solid colour back ground. The second one are the twelfth century Nepalese manuscripts, written with gold and silver pigments on black paper. This tradition, as Stoddard points out, was known and imitated in Tibet from very early times, as proven by the Tibetan Prajñāpāramitā manuscript of the Newark Museum, written in gold on black paper and radio-carbon dated to 1195 A.D. Stoddard concludes that the Gold Manuscript, produced between 1674 and 1681, “stands as the earliest dated manifestation of the ‘black thangka’ genre of painting”. Béguin, in his study of the black paintings from the Lionel Fournier Collection, observes that the thang-kas which look most an-

cient are the ones painted on silk. However, his tentative stylistic dating to the sixteenth century of the two nag-thangs painted on silk of the collection, numbers 71 and 72, seems to be based more on the indisputable quality of the paintings than on specific stylistic comparisons. Béguin, as we shall see, is absolutely right when he notes that the treatment of the illustrations of the Gold Manuscript is too sophisticated to be the first manifestation of this kind of painting. The earliest datable nag-thang yet published is the dPal-idan lha-mo in the Ford Collection. This painting has been convincingly dated to circa the 1630s and before 1642 on the basis of the inscriptions that identify the three bla-mas represented.

The thang-ka here studied (Fig. 1) measures 52 by 40 centimetres. It still retains the original mounting, consisting of two trapezoidal panels of orange-brown silk attached one to the top and one to the bottom of the painting. A thin yellow silk ribbon is stitched to the left and right sides of the painting, to protect them. A yellow silk veil, decorated with a simple tie-dye motif, is attached to the top of the mounting. Its purpose was probably to protect and conceal the painting when unrolled and not in use. From a technical point of view, this thang-ka is a typical example of nag-thang. The painting is executed on very thin black silk, using only three colours. The linear work of the contours of the figures, as well as most of the details of the drawing, are rendered in a gold pigment and only some of the highlights are painted in red or in a very transparent white. Red is also used to depict the flames in the halos of the figures. The black ground is left exposed in most of the painting. The back of the painting carries two long inscriptions in gold, in Tibetan dhu-med script, enclosed in the drawings of two stūpas, placed in correspondence with the main figures on the front side. The inscriptions are made up of various mantras, some for Mahākāla, written partly in Tibetan and partly in Sanskrit, tran-

11 Heather Stoddard has transcribed part of these inscriptions.
scribed using the Tibetan alphabet. Each figure represented on the front has the “Om a hum” mantra written on the back.

The two main deities are two forms of Mahakala (Nag-po chen-po) and are each supported by a lotus flower. On the
left (Fig. 2) is represented a two-armed form of Mahākāla, in 
pratyāśiṣṭha on a corpse, holding a skull-cup (kapāla) and a 
chopper (kaṇṭhrika) and wearing a human skin knotted round 
his shoulders. On the right (Fig. 3) appears a four-armed 
form of the same protective deity, seated in lalitāsana and 
holding a skull-cup and what could be a piece of flesh or a 
heart in the first pair of arms and in the second pair, a flan-
ing sword and a trident (triśūla). These two wrathful aspects 
of Mahākāla, both with bulging eyes and gaping mouths, 
share a common halo of flames, among which five figures, 
belonging to their retinues, appear. Above the heads of both 
the Mahākālas are representations of two-armed Samvara and 
Vajrarāhī in sexual union (yab-yum). Flanking the four-
armed Mahākāla are two female figures offering a pot, 12 
while the two-armed one has to his right two birds carrying 
human flesh in their beaks and a yak trampling on a corpse. 
In the upper corners behind the halo, a goddess seated on a 
bird is represented on the left and yet a different form of 
Mahākāla appears on the right. The whole scene is set in a 
cemetery, parts of which can be seen behind the halo in the 
upper part.

Below the main image, sixteen figures are arranged in two 
registers. In the first, from left to right, appear dPal-l丹 
Lha-mo, followed by a two-armed form of Mahākāla, holding 
a sword and a skull-cup. Then there are two wrathful male 
deities, with animal heads and five female ones, also with 
different animal heads. 13 The lower register contains an offi-

12 The same two offering figures can be seen in a late Pāla sculpture 
representing a four-armed Mahākāla, now in the Metropolitan Museum of 
Art, New York. Susan L. Huntington and John C. Huntington, Leaves 
from the Bodhi Tree. The Art of Pala India (8th-12th Centuries) and Its 
27. Susan L. Huntington makes the hypothesis that these two figures “are 
probably human devotees, not goddesses, since they are not cast as atten-
dants or part of the deity’s retinue but rather as suppliants”. The fact 
that they reappear on a Tibetan painting makes me think that they proba-
bly had a rather more substantial role in the iconography of this form of 
Mahākāla.

13 They could be Kāli, Karāli, Varāli, Kankāli and Mahākāli, the five 
yoginis who can be represented together with two and four-armed forms 
of Mahākāla. See Marie-Thérèse De Mallmann, Introduction a l’icono-
graphie du tântrisme bouddhique, Paris: Bibliothèque du Centre de recher-
ches sur l’Asie centrale et la haute Asie, 1975, p. 238.
ciating monk in front of gtor-ma offerings contained in a skull-cup placed on a tripod. Then a female form of Mahākāla is represented, followed by five more wrathful male deities with animal heads. All the gods and the goddesses of these

Fig. 2. Detail of Fig. 1. The two-armed Mahākāla.
two rows are portrayed in flaming auras, while the monk is shown sitting in front of a curtain.

Above the main icon there is a single register with a lineage of six figures. These figures, except for one, are not

Fig. 3. Detail of Fig. 1. The four-armed Mahākāla.
Fig. 4. Detail of Fig. 1. Jñānatapa and Sang-rgyas Yar-byon.

easily identifiable on iconographic grounds because their iconography is not particularly distinctive. From left to right appear an Indian mahāsiddha, holding a skull-cup, followed by an Indian monk. The third figure is the only one easily recognisable (Fig. 4, left): it is the mahāsiddha Jñānatapa, wearing the typical pandita hat and holding a casket and a trumpet. A thang-ka portraying Jñānatapa has recently been studied by Singer. 14 She has shown how Jñānatapa, an Indian mahāsiddha in the tradition of Tilopa and Naropa, was also considered to be a previous incarnation of Sang-rgyas dBon-po (1251-1296), the monk who in 1273 and for only one year was the fourth abbot of sTag-lung monastery in dBus. He was replaced as abbot by his cousin Mang-ga-la guru (1231-1297), who was supported by Phags-pa (1235-1280), Regent of Tibet at the time, and the first Sa-skya bla-ma to be linked to the Yuan Emperor in the ‘Patron and Priest’ (yon-mchod) relation. 15 Sang-rgyas dBon-po had to escape to Khams, where in 1276 he founded the monastery of Ri-bo-che. 16 The other three figures of the lineage are dressed as

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Fig. 5. Detail of Fig. 1. The inscription above the first Tibetan bla-ma in the top register.

Tibetan bla-mas. The first one can be identified because of a fortunate coincidence. The stitching of the mounting at the top of the painting had become loose in some areas, revealing some faint inscriptions at the top edge of the painting, which would be normally be covered by the mounting. These inscriptions were probably made to help the painter in the correct placing of the figures of the lineage. Some of these inscriptions were photographed before the mounting was stitched back. Above the first Tibetan bla-ma it is possible to read “Yar-byon-pa” (Fig. 5). The inscription clearly identifies the monk portrayed as Sang-rgyas Yar-byon Shes-rab (1203-1272), third abbot of sTag-lung, from 1236 to 1272 (Fig. 4, right).¹⁷ No inscription is available for the second Tibetan bla-ma and above the third only the syllable “-bzhu-k...” is readable. This is sufficient to identify the lineage as a sTag-lung one, even if it does not make it possible to ascertain if the painting was produced for sTag-lung or for Ri-bo-che monastery. Whichever the case, two bla-mas after Sang-rgyas

¹⁷ Roerich, op. cit., p. 627-628.
Yar-byon, would bring the lineage to the beginning of the fourteenth century, since Sang-rgyas dBon-po died in 1296 and Mang-ga-la gu-ru in 1297. Such a dating for the thang-ka is supported also by a radio-carbon test (C\textsubscript{14}) of it, which gave 1285-1399 A.D. as the possible range for the dating of the silk on which the painting was executed.

A dating to the beginning of the fourteenth century for the two Mahākālas thang-ka is not surprising also considering some of its stylistic features. The way the three Tibetan bla-mas are portrayed, with the flesh in solid gold and the folds of the garments rendered by thin unmodulated lines, is exactly the same as what can be seen in a set of consecration cards (tsakali), studied by Heller.\textsuperscript{18} This set, commissioned by Sang-rgyas dBon-po and dedicated to Sang-rgyas Yar-byon, was produced at sTag-lung between 1263 and 1272. The cards are painted on paper with a brilliant vermillion red background and the figures drawn using a linear technique in black or darker red. The flesh of the figures is rendered using a gold pigment and the hair is painted in black. Other colours, especially white, are sparingly used to high-light some other details. This set of tsakali could possibly represent the beginning of the gold thang-ka (gser-thang) tradition, which, as we have seen, differs from the black thang-ka tradition only in the choice of the background colour, even if the colours used for the drawing of the figures are here dark red and black and not gold. The two Mahākālas, that appear with the same iconography in other sTag-lung thang-kas,\textsuperscript{19} display all the characteristics of the Indian Pāla style as rendered in thirteen century Tibet. These two very lively figures have a strong volumetric presence achieved not by the juxtaposition of contrasting colours, as normally happens in thang-kas of this style, but by contrasting the rather plain bodies with a

\textsuperscript{18} Amy Heller, "A Set of Thirteenth Century Tsakali", Orientations, 10, 1997, pp. 266-270. See, in particular, Fig. 3a, a portrait of Sang-rgyas Yar-byon.

much busier background of flames. Specific conventions, typical of the style, are applied. For instance the four-armed Mahākāla wears a long dhoti made of a tiger pelt which comes down to the ankles and still most of the leg is seen as if the dhoti were transparent. This ‘transparent dhoti’ convention is typically seen in the depiction of standing bodhisattvas in Indian style. The scarf covering the shoulders of the two-armed Mahākālas is rather simple and less naturalistic than the later examples seen in thang-kas influenced by Chinese styles of painting. The petals of the lotuses on which the figures are represented are very plain and the flames in the halos are built up by overlapping simple triangular shapes. The much more complex scrollwork used in Nepalese style painting for flames and backgrounds does not appear in this painting. The two Mahākālas thang-ka can therefore be considered a typical example of the Indian Pāla style, as practised in thirteenth century central Tibet, with no stylistic influences either from Nepalese or Chinese painting.

To conclude, the relevance of the two Mahākālas thang-ka to the history of Tibetan painting is at least twofold. It pushes back the tradition of nag-thang to the beginning of the fourteenth century, two and half centuries earlier than was previously thought, and firmly associates the origins of the tradition with the Indian Pāla style practised in central Tibet.

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20 See, for instance, Steven M. Kossak and Jane Casey Singer (eds.), op. cit., p. 104, n. 23. Wrathful deities are often depicted with a short dhoti. There are other examples however of wrathful deities wearing long tiger dhotis in which the ‘transparent dhoti’ convention is applied. See, for instance, Steven M. Kossak and Jane Casey Singer (eds.), op. cit., p. 83, n. 14.

21 This convention for representing flames can be seen in other Indian style thang-kas. See, for instance Steven M. Kossak and Jane Casey Singer (eds.), op. cit., p. 89, n. 17 and Jane Casey Singer, op. cit., pp. 52-67, p. 60, fig. 42.
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ABSTRACT
Black *thang-kas* are a very specific group of Tibetan Buddhist paintings. Western scholarship has considered them to be a relatively late development in Tibetan Buddhist art. The earliest firmly datable example found in the art-historical literature goes back to the first half of the seventeenth century. However, the *thang-ka* representing two Mahākālas studied in this article, which can be dated on the basis of inscriptive and stylistic evidence to not later than the beginning of the fourteenth century, proves that the tradition of producing black *thang-kas* existed at least two and half centuries earlier. The beginning of this tradition appears to be connected with a Tibetan version of the Pāla style.

KEY WORDS